

# Shabbos Korach 80 – Pirkei Avos Chapter Three - Round Two

6 27 20

*We are instructed as Jews to initiate greetings to 'every person'.*

*'Every person', is an extremely broad spectrum. Even to our enemies?*

*Surprisingly, it is precisely in the context of our enemies that we derive this noble idea from.*

*But what value could there be in kowtowing to those that despise us? Is this an insincere portrayal of friendship that is merely an expedient to peaceful coexistence?*

*Discover the Torah's remarkable lesson in human relations and read about a brilliant 'tactic' employed by none other than the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, whose yahrtzeit was commemorated this week, in achieving the Torah's ultimate goal of influencing the world towards divine kindness and positivity.*

## Conquering with Love

Prior to confronting our most dreaded enemies, the Torah instructs us nevertheless to first “call out to it for peace”; to initiate an overture for peace. If our adversary acquiesces and agrees to “pay taxes and obligate themselves to perform national service”, we must recede and allow them to live. This rule applies even to the reviled seven nations that inhabited the land of Canaan. (Maimonides and Nachmanides)

Rabbeinu Avigdor of France, one of the later Balei Tosafos, records that this directive is the basis for the popular dictum “one should initiate a greeting to every person” (Avos 4 20). The Talmud (Berachos 17) relates that based on this principle, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai “would be the first to greet even a gentile in the marketplace”.

This gesture for peace is contingent on the enemy’s acceptance of subservience to the Jewish nation, as the Torah clearly states, “to be taxed and to serve you”. (Devarim 20 11)

Is this concept then parallel to the noble notion of “greeting people” in general? It was merely a alternative mode of conquering and placing our enemy under our sovereignty. They were offered one of three choices; to flee, “put up their dukes” and fight, or submit and surrender.

Can this be the source for the general spreading of good cheer in the world?

Rabbeinu Avigdor makes a most fascinating connection in the next paragraph that discusses the prohibition of *Baal Tashchis*, wanton destruction.

The Torah commands regarding the besieging of a city that we must refrain from destroying fruit bearing trees in the process. The verse in its literal reading equates the vitality of a tree to that of a human in emphasizing our need to preserve its life of productivity.

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*“Do not cut down a tree, because like a man is the tree of the field...” (ibid 19)*

Rabbeinu Avigdor quoting the *Dorshei Reshumos*, those who interpret the mystical under currents in the verse, teaches that this comparison alludes to the very first stifling of productivity that took place when Canaan, the grandson of Noach, emasculated Noach in his drunken stupor, out of fear that another child would be born who he would have to contend with.

In facing these seven nations who are associated with the land of “Canaan”, whose original callous act of destruction makes him so deserving of eradication, we must be sensitive to the reason for their downfall by extolling the value of preserving life.

It is precisely in the context of Canaan that this *mitzvah* takes prominence.

The Talmud (Pesachim 50) teaches the name “Canaan” is a contraction of the sentiment, *ayn caan ani*, “there is no poverty here”. They were an industrious people and keen entrepreneurs whose very title *Canaani* became an appellation for a successful trader and dealer.

Canaan represented success, but at all costs. If it was necessary to mow down the competition, so be it. He saw the possibility of a fourth son born to Noach as an existential threat and thus allowed himself to “secure” his “rights” by engaging in this destructive act, assuring there would be no one interfering with his goals.

One who lives in a “dog eat dog” world, is liable to exercise his power of destruction to insure his survival. One who sees oneself as the sole provider of one’s destiny, inevitably will succumb to this poisonous attitude.

When we begin to see ourselves as part of a bigger picture, gaining validation through the eyes of others, conscious of the notion that I am appreciated for who I am independent of my wealth, stature or accomplishments, that is the beginning of the restoration of our nobility. One who senses this will never resort to crushing others who stand in the way of imaginary status or sense of being.

When we give credence to everyone we meet, regardless of whom they might be, we assert the inherent value and potential of every human. The Talmud (Berachos 6) teaches that one who ignores a person who normally greets you is considered a thief. If someone looks to you for validation and you ignore him, you have taken away his most prized possession, his very being!

Perhaps that is the emphasis Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai placed on greeting even a gentile in the “marketplace”. In the markets of competition and financial gain lies the gravest danger of selfish distraction. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai sought to restore their true sense of nobility thus saving them from their own self destruction.

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Our reaching out to our enemies with an olive branch of peace is not merely a threatening tactic. It is our belief that even the most depraved of our foes can sense their true essence and purpose. The arousing within them that sense of validation can bring them to realize the privilege that awaits them if they join our mission.

That appreciation extends to every facet of life. One who is wrapped up in oneself will lack regard for even the most magnificent “fruits” of life that await him.

No wonder this portion that deals with the cohorts of Canaan begins with a “greeting of peace”, for in that royal attitude lies the seeds of hope for mankind in avoiding a descent into a pattern of “destroy and conquer”.

*In Joseph Telushkin's masterful book about the Lubavitcher Rebbe entitled Rebbe, he retells the following story. p.93*

*One innovative insight of the Rebbe concerning love was that the affection and honor that others receive from us will, in turn, influence them to become more loving and decent to others. Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz recalls his great annoyance when he learned that North Carolina senator Jesse Helms had been honored at a celebration of the Rebbe's eightieth birthday. Dershowitz characterized Helms as no friend of Israel or of the Jewish people. He wrote a letter to the Rebbe in which he expressed his annoyance. As he later recalled, "The Rebbe wrote me back one of the most beautiful responses. He said, 'you honor not only to influence the past but to influence the future'. He then wrote, 'watch Senator Helms and see whether or not our decision was a correct one.' " Within a year of that honor, Dershowitz reported, Helms had become one of Israel's strongest supporters in the Senate and, as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, one of its most important.*

If this be true regarding our enemies, how much more so must we implement these concepts among those closest to us.

May we instill within ourselves an appreciation of others that will be a source of encouragement to them that will enable us to bring about a world that will be conquered by love.